THE BLASPHEMING MOON

by

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Adapted for the stage
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(The action takes place between the years 1868 and 1898, in Aix-en-Provence and Paris. As the audience enters, the stage is dimly lit. On stage is a large table covered with plain cloth. On the table are various props. Along the back wall are three chairs: a bentwood cafe chair, a wicker chair with a bamboo cane hung over one arm and another rather nondescript chair in need of some repair. Also upstage are a rickety little table and an armoire. Downstage, slightly to one side, is a tall velveteen covered chair with a little nightstand. On the nightstand are a palette, some brushes, and a rag. Projected on the rear wall is Cezanne's Portrait of Achille Empraire.)

(STAGE LIGHTS UP AS ACHILLE ENTERS CARRIED TO VELVETEEN CHAIR BY ATTENDANT.)

(AIX-EN-PROVENCE)

ACHILLE: My God! Middle age!
I finally admit it.
(ACHILLE IS IN THE CHAIR. ATTENDANT EXITS)
There's the good side:
you get a sense of direction,
you finally know who you are,
and anyone who doesn't like it
can get stuffed!
Then there's the bad side:
your hair starts falling out,
your teeth start falling out
and you can't get it up any more
and you wonder if you're ever going
to make it. I met this fellow
Paul Cezanne--he'll make it.
I put my money on him.
He wants to paint my portrait.
"Who'd want to look
at a dwarf?" I said.
"Wait till I've finished with you,"
he said, "Then they'll look!"
(PROJECTION OF PORTRAIT IS TURNED OFF AS ACHILLE ASSUMES THE POSE.)

I'm posing
for the fifth day in a row for Paul Cezanne.
He has me wearing my long johns
and my old blue dressing gown.
"I look as though I'm sitting
on a commode," I say.
"Exactly," he replies. "It's the new
Realism. Zola will love it!"
"But if it's the new Realism," I say,
"why is the portrait six foot high?
That's almost twice my size."
"Well," he says, "that's how I see you.

To me you're six foot tall."

Marie is darning.
She's a good housekeeper.
The needle goes in.
A good nurse.
The needle comes out.
She's kind.
The needle goes in.
Good with children.
Comes out.
I married her because of these things.
She and the children live in a world
of braids and button hooks,
rag dolls and doilies,
porridge and jam,
white sheets and darning.

Marie does comfort me.
It's not the comfort of a lover
or a whore but of a mother
or a nurse. Yet sometimes
I come inside her
till she squeaks!
I do it as a gesture,
not thinking of her.
Sometimes I say out
loud as I take her,
"I'll show them!
I'll show them I can fuck!"

(TAKING OFF DRESSING GOWN.)

I'm looking out at the Mountain.
It is a pretty view
and I love to paint it
but I'm not so obsessed with it as Paul.
I long to climb to the top
but with my little legs I'd never make it.
Last night I dreamed I had struggled to the peak
with Paul's help,
and I held his hand
and we took off and flew over the valley,
laughing and drunk like two mad angels:
mad angels of art.
We flew over the Art School
and thumbed our noses,
over our houses
and waved and said:
"We can do without you all for a while."
Soon we were in Paris
circling over the towers of Notre Dame

and I said, "This will go on forever."
But Paul said, "No. This is a dream
about megalomania.
We think we're gods.
Icarus was like us.
Your wings will melt before mine, Achille.
I'm sorry, cher ami,
but they will."

(ACHILLE IS PANTING, OUT OF BREATH, YET EXUBERANT FROM EXERCISE.)

I am exhausted.
I've been hanging by my arms
from my trapeze
for over half an hour.
I really believe it's working.
I've just measured myself by the doorframe --
definitely a quarter of an inch this month.
I've carved a notch.
Of course sometimes I think I am deluding myself --
I may be subconsciously pushing up on my heels.
But it looks as though I've grown
two inches in three years!
Quite extraordinary at my age --
I'm thirty-five today.

(HE COLLAPSES BACK IN CHAIR; HE FONDLES THE NAP OF THE UPHOLSTERY.)

I adore velveteen covered chairs!
I sit on them whenever I can --
in second-hand shops,
friends' houses.
I stroke the dark red
cropped grass of them and
I feel safe.
Perhaps being in the womb
was like being in a
red velveteen cocoon:
safe and sound,
unhurt when I kicked against the sides,
unseen, not a cripple yet,
only a promise,
a hope,
striving for the light
of 1829.
It wasn't a difficult birth.
I looked normal,
so they did the normal thing:
they turned me upside down
and slapped me.

It wasn't until I had cried non-stop
for three weeks that they discovered
they had cracked both my arms
and both my legs.
They called them green stick fractures--
like the snapping of green bamboo
or a stick of celery.
I can't eat celery
without shuddering;
and I worry for bamboo
bending fit to snap
in the wet southern winds,
the lashing of the unhelpful rain
that keeps me indoors.
I can't risk stepping on the pavement
in rain. I could slip and crack a thigh.
Rain is as dangerous to me
as the doctor's hand
wet and fresh from my mother's vagina.
Red velveteen is dry
and firm. I'm wrong.
The womb is wet and shifting.
That's why I was safe there.
I get confused sometimes
as to what is safe,
what is kind to my eggshell body.
I'd be best off
swimming in a placid pool,
the soft shore
whispering from all sides:
"Listen to your mother, Achille.
You're still mine
and you are a loving child."

My father was an inspector of weights and measures.
Perhaps that is why I was born so small.
He was stingy when it came to weight.
Then my children all outgrew me
by the age of nine.
It was like fathering your own parents.
At first they were quite parental.
They liked to fetch and carry for me,
but once they reached the age of twelve
the novelty wore off.
Sometimes everything takes so much effort,
and yet I weigh so little
I have less to carry around.
Then again I have a curved spine
and a limp.
I am like a maimed elf,
a hindered sprite,
a spirit

held down by something other than weight,
by imbalance,
distorted contours,
angles.
I weigh my left side with my right,
my painting with my housekeeping,
my Paris with my Aix-en-Provence.
I stand swaying,
holding onto the doorframe,
one foot barely touching the ground.

(FADE TO BLACK.)

(ATTENDANT ENTERS, CROSSES TO TABLE AND SQUEEZES EXCESS WATER FROM CLOTH, HANDS CLOTH TO ACHILLE, AND EXITS. ACHILLE PLACES DAMP CLOTH ON FOREHEAD, AS THOUGH SUFFERING FROM A HANGOVER.)

I sat for Paul again last night.
The expression on my face in the portrait is so solemn.
I said, "Why so, Paul?"
He said, "It's an expression of defiance.
You're sitting on the pot and you won't shit.
I always told you you were full of it."
After that there was nothing for it but
to get out the Bordeaux and we got so plastered that
I ended up on my hands and knees baying
like a hound and chasing Paul around the studio
with him playing the fox and screeching
so eerily it sent chills up my spine
though I was laughing till I couldn't see.

(LAUGHING, HE CLUTCHES HIS HEAD IN PAIN.)

This morning I walked into a lamp post.
Embarrassing. I heard a
"Watch out!" too late.
I had been staring at a young man
boarding a coach for Cahors.
So handsome -- his eyes caught mine,
his malacca stick, gleaming boots,
stern black beard, new top hat.
Young man, I wanted to share your carriage.
What will you do in Cahors?
Transfer to Bordeaux, to Paris?
What is your profession?
I stared after the carriage
and though it was raining hard,
I fancied I saw him turn
and stare back through the oval rear window

(ATTENDANT ENTERS, CROSSES TO WICKER CHAIR, MOVES IT DOWNSTAGE TO WITHIN ACHILLE'S SIGHT. ATTENDANT SITS IN CHAIR, MIMING THE PART OF THE YOUNG MAN (RAOUL), AS ACHILLE DESCRIBES HIM.)

like a portrait of a famous man
slowly disappearing.
Once the coach had gone out of sight,
my eyes fixed on the patch of dry ground
it had left beneath it.
I waited and waited
till the rain filled it in
and I looked up and there before me
long, brown, monotonous,
the old road to Cahors.

(ATTENDANT DROPS CHARACTER OF YOUNG MAN AS HE CROSSES TO ACHILLE AND TAKES CLOTH FROM HIM. ACHILLE TAKES OLD STRAW HAT FROM SHELF OF NIGHTSTAND AND PUTS IT ON, TAKES UP PALETTE AND BRUSH. AT THE SAME TIME, ATTENDANT REPLACES CLOTH IN SMALL DISH, PUTS PEAR ON NIGHTSTAND AND EXITS.)

The light is famous here:
the white shutters dazzle,
the yellow highlights dazzle,
the soft rust of brick barns:
ah, that would make anyone cry.

I'm getting sunburnt,
painting by the quarry
all day in Paul's old straw hat:

(REMOVES HAT, CONTEMPLATING IT.)

I wear it for good luck –
as if genius could be transmitted
through a hat!

(HE MAKES A MOTION TO THROW HAT AWAY, THINKS BETTER OF IT, AND PUTS IT BACK ON. RESUMES PAINTING.)

Often I wonder if I would have done better
as another kind of artist – a poet --
but where are the words?
A sculptor? But I live in colour.
A musician? But I can't hold a note.
It's the plasticity, the sensuousness
that attracts me to paint.
The smell of it.

(PASSING BRUSH UNDER HIS NOSE, LIKE A GOOD CIGAR.)

The texture of taut linen --
the tsk tsk naughty-naughty
violation of the white-priest-goddam-
Jesus-white of the canvas
that seduces me.
I've got that canvas at my mercy.
I can say: I am going to take you
with my tsk tsk.
Hear it -- that's my music.
Feel it -- that's my sculpture.
See it -- that's my final joy.

(BUSINESS OF CLEANING BRUSHES.)

I was thinking about the old days
at the Art School so I decided to
take a walk round some of our old haunts.
I went to look at the Zola dam
and up past the Bibémus quarry.
Those days were always hot
and sunny so it seems now.
We scratched our legs on briars,
ate bread and cheese and drank cheap wine
in the shade of the little shack
by the quarry. We all wrote
poems and declaimed them
to each other. They were awful of course
but we were so passionate.

(PICKS UP PEAR.)

I wish I'd known Paul in those days
when he was young and
before he got bitter,
before I got bitter.
Those were the days
when you just created
for the hell of it. You didn't care
what the old farts at the Art School said.
You smiled to yourself
and did the opposite.
You trailed your paints
and canvas up to the quarry
and painted till you were sick
from the sun, you were dizzy
from the wine, the birds chattered
louder than usual,
and all the while
you smiled to yourself
and muttered your latest
epic in iambics
under your breath.

(SPEAKS NEXT TWO LINES AS THOUGH DELIVERING A MOCK ORATION TO THE PEAR, HOLDING IT BEFORE HIM.)

I was so in love, with you, pear,
that after I had painted you
(DROPS ORATOR POSE.)
I couldn't eat you.
You were so tempting.
I was so hungry.
(REPLACES PEAR.)
But I left you on the sill
to rot in your own good time.

(FADE TO SPECIAL ON PEAR, THEN QUICK BLACKOUT.)

(ATTENDANT COMES ON IN SHIRTSLEEVES BAREFOOT, AND MIMES ACTION OF BOY IN GRASS MAKING LOVE, AND OTHER ACTIONS AS ACHILLE DESCRIBES THEM.)

Aix is hissing
and steaming like an exotic kettle --
all red lilies, yellow light
and insects.
I went for a walk this morning
in the fields opposite.
The grass comes up over my head.
Suddenly I came upon a pair
of young men making love in the grass,
quite naked. I was embarrassed
but they were unabashed.
For a moment I wondered
what it would be like to be
one of them. Then one of them
said, "Care to join us, little man?"
I couldn't help blushing.
"No, I'm not that way," I said.
"Come now," said the other,
"a little cutie like you?"
They giggled. I stepped back.

(ATTENDANT RUNS OFF WITH "FRIEND".)

They were from the Art School no doubt.
How times change!
Imagine if Paul and I were students now...
He would have to drink a lot of wine.
He would have to drink an awful lot of wine.

There are times --
perhaps two or three times a month,
I don't really remember how often --
when I feel a great surge of energy

flow through my body, an overwhelming
desire for movement I myself cannot perform.
I visualize myself running through
long grasses in a strange bluish field,
grasses so tall that they brush against
my thighs; and my thighs are those
of a healthy young man of sixteen
or seventeen: smooth, white and glistening
with sweat from the exertion and with dew
from the grasses; never a body attached
to the legs, merely the legs themselves;
perfect, powerful, running on forever
through the stiff green blades.
Other times I am a complete being;
a distant grey figure spinning
like a top or a whirlwind dancer
away across the fields, through the
orchards, through the walls of the
red-roofed farmhouses, out over the
hills I go with this phantom of
myself, out through the mists to the
moonlit sea, and mingle with the
gulls spiraling
upward
to the stars.

(BLACKOUT. QUICK FADE UP.)

I've had the most incredible stroke of luck.
I've actually sold a painting --
for fifty francs!
I sold it to the woman my friend Alphonse
works for -- he does her garden.
Fifty francs for a piece of wisteria!
She must be crazy.
She says she'll hang it in her living room.
She's getting old, you see, and won't
be able to sit in her garden much longer
so my painting will be the next best thing.
She wrote me a letter:
"Young man, (I like that --
'young man'!) you must got to Paris
and ply your wares." And you know what?
I'm going! I bought my train ticket,
packed a portfolio of drawings and
some provisions. Marie says I'm irresponsible.
I should save the money for the children.
"Wait till I'm rich and famous," I say.
"Then the children can have everything
their little hearts desire."
"That's what they all say," she replies.
Why does she have to put a wet blanket

(ATTENDANT ENTERS PUTS PAUL'S HAT AND PEAR ON PROP TABLE, MOVES NIGHTSTAND TO WICKER CHAIR, TAKES COAT AND BOATER FROM ARMOIRE AND HELPS ACHILLE PUT THEM ON.)

over everything? Besides, I won't spend
it all. I can stay at Paul's...
Mind you it is a dreadful trip up there --
the horrors of third class:
Farmers with chickens, peasant women
with caterwauling babies, cantankerous
old men coughing and spitting, drunks
cursing. And in this heat! Phew!
Ah, but who cares? I bought a new suit
for the occasion. Just the ticket
for gay Paris! Just the ticket!

(ATTENDANT SCOOPS UP ACHILLE AND TRANSFERS HIM TO WICKER CHAIR.)

(ACHILLE TAKES BRUSH AND MIMES PAINTING.)

(PARIS)

I'm in Paris at last!
It's glorious -- almond trees
like pink fireworks,
the Seine a blue satin ribbon,
Notre Dame like a beneficent
dinosaur presiding over us.
I sat all day under its gaze
and painted with Paul.
I didn't dare to look at his canvas.
I kept thinking, in ten years which of Europe's
famous galleries will house this one?
Paul encourages me as always.
He has a big heart and
a lying tongue.
But I wouldn't change places
with him. He <u>feels</u> his loneliness more.

Paul's painting is very strange now.
He sees nature as cylinders,
tetrahedrons, God knows what.
I tell him he's more of a solid
geometer than an
"Impressionist."
He says that I draw like Seurat. I've never heard of Seurat!

(HE STOPS PAINTING.)

(ATTENDANT ENTERS, MOVES VELVETEEN CHAIR AGAINST BACK WALL, DRAPES ROBE OVER IT. PICKS UP PORT-FOLIO AND CHARCOAL.)

If you half close your eyes
things get blurred and uncertain.
You see only blocks of colour --
chunks of forms.
When you look at a scene
with your eyes wide open
only a small area is in sharp focus
at any one time.

But what's in your peripheral vision
beckons you and says, "I am sharp too."
Then you look back to the centre
and that's sharp.
And then back and forth, back and forth.
Our eyes deceive us.
Our brains make fools of us.

(ACHILLE MOTIONS TO ATTENDANT, WHO BRINGS HIM PORTFOLIO AND CHARCOAL. ACHILLE BEGINS SKETCHING. ATTENDANT EXITS.)

Only our hearts know what is strong and real.
Trust your heart, my mother used to say.
So I did.
I painted.

(PAUSE)

Then my mother said:
"Why can't you do something useful?"

I can't stand it when people look
over my shoulder when I'm copying.
"My goodness," says an old dame, "it looks
just like Titian. Aren't you clever!"
"Yes," I say, "I am.
I am very clever and you, madam, are only one
of many who have remarked on the fact."

(THROWS SKETCHBOOK TO THE FLOOR.)

Paul is under strain.
He always has some "damnable business"
plaguing him.
Finally I got angry and said,
"I suppose your father
hasn't sent the money again."
He picked up one of my drawings and
began ever so slowly to tear it in half.
"Say that again," he said, "and I'll go
all the way."

(ATTENDANT ENTERS AS RAOUL (THE YOUNG MAN FROM THE COACH TO CAHORS), READING A LITTLE VOLUME OF POETRY. HE SPOTS ACHILLE, STROLLS OVER TO HIM FROM BEHIND. ON CUE, "HAND

The strangest thing happened today.
I was looking at the masks in an antique shop
in the rue des Épins --
devils with vampire teeth,
dragons with scales like dying leaves,
Chinamen with parchment smiles --
when all of a sudden
I felt a presence behind me.
slightly to the left,
a shadow in the window.
For some reason I remembered the dry patch

TOUCHED MY SHOULDER," RAOUL DOES SO.)

under the coach going to Cahors --
just an image, I thought,
a trick of memory.
A hand tapped my shoulder.
I turned. A voice said, "My name is Raoul.
Haven't we met?"

(ATTENDANT CROUCHES DOWN ON RIGHT SIDE OF CHAIR BY ACHILLE AND WATCHES HIM PAINT AND MIMES ACTION DESCRIBED BY ACHILLE.)

Raoul is watching me paint.
"More shadow on the right," he says.
He's a poet. What does he know?
"More red. On the left. Right there," he says
and he has the audacity to put his finger
on the canvas. Then he adds, "But it's
brilliant nevertheless."

(RAOUL KISSES ACHILLE ON CHEEK, MUSSES ACHILLE'S HAIR, AND CROSSES TO SIT IN VELVETEEN CHAIR, READING HIS BOOK.)

Well, I think, maybe he does know something.
He reminds me rather of Paul
when he was younger -- the same darkness,
that brooding quality.
It's strange; it's as if I'm falling
in love!
Perhaps it's Paris and the wine,
the spring air,
my new painting,
Raoul's new poem.
Yet, whenever he's not here,
even for a second,
I feel abandoned like a child
lost at the zoo,
the animals scratching at their cages,
baring their teeth at me.

(RAOUL TAKES MIRROR FROM PROP TABLE, WALKS OVER TO ACHILLE, HANDS HIM MIRROR, STANDS BEHIND CHAIR LOOKING OVER ACHILLE'S SHOULDER.)

The trouble with dark eyes
is that they're so hard to read.
Raoul's eyes are dark violet
and you can't see beneath all that
shining.

(LOOKING IN MIRROR.)

On the other hand my eyes are pale green.
"I can read you like a book," says Raoul.
"You're an open book. You're all feeling."

The reflection of a reflection
goes off to infinity.
Sometimes I look in the mirror
and hold up a small hand mirror
under my chin
and angle it in such a way
that there's a second reflection of me
in the big mirror --
smaller, lower right,
going off to nothing.
What a pair we make:
An image and its diminutive.
When I scowl, he scowls.
When I pout, he pouts.
I brush back my hair --
which I must say is luxurious --
with my long delicate fingers.
He does the same.
I do this for minutes on end.
I know what some would think --
this is narcissism,
this is an illness.
But I want to see what's there,
how others see me:
smaller than I feel myself or see myself,
more varied than I feel myself
or see myself,
more wonderful than I could ever know
unless I looked and looked.

(RAOUL TAKES MIRROR FROM ACHILLE, HELPS HIM ON WITH SLING. ON "...Madame F.'s last night," RAOUL STARTS TO GO, TURNS, GIVES ACHILLE A LOOK. ON "...me relieve tensions," RAOUL EXITS WITH MIRROR AND HAT.)

I break bones easily.
I have my arm in a sling now.
I was at my friend, Madame F.'s
last night. She helps me relieve
tensions. I was about to relieve
my tension when I
tripped over the mat and broke
my collar bone. We both
started laughing. I couldn't stop
even though I was in agony.

I was still laughing when the doctor came.
He gave me a stern look,
There I was, half naked,
a married crippled painter
in a brothel and I'd broken
my collarbone and I was laughing.

Paul is impossible!
I shouldn't have gotten this involved.
I'll have to leave.
Everything I say and do is wrong.
If I say I like one of his paintings
he calls it rubbish
and throws a plate at the wall.
If I say he could do better,
he says, "You vile dwarf!
Can't you tell genius when you see it?"

(ACHILLE REMOVES SLING, WORKS ARM A BIT.)

Politics invades everything.
The insidious cockroaches
of art -- the gallery owners,
the art dealers, the Salon
committee members, the entrepreneurs,
eat us up like crumbs.
That's if they like the taste
of us. Fussy cockroaches these.
You have to be tactful
and charming to get on.
I'm always saying the wrong thing:
I once told a gallery owner,
who had the taste of a low-class pimp,
that he had egg in his beard.
He was livid.
I meant it well.
He did have egg in his beard.
Now that my work's been rejected again
by the Salon,
I decided to write them a letter.
I'm rather pleased with it:

(RAOUL ENTERS WITH LETTER AND OTHER HAT, CROUCHES NEXT TO ACHILLE, GIVES HIM LETTER ON CUE "I decided".)

(READING)
"You are your own worst enemies.
If you persist in choosing
safe art, your Salon will rot
inwardly like a maggot-infested peach.
All good new art takes risks.
You have power, dear sirs:
use it to encourage progress
not the perpetration of defunct traditions
and moth-eaten sentiments.
Give us risk-takers the chance."

I think they might not like
the bit about the maggot-infested peach.
(RAOUL GIVES ACHILLE HAT, AND EXITS WITH LETTER AND SLING. ACHILLE DONS HAT AND TAKES CANE IN HAND)

I met a man taken with religion.
He stopped me in the rue des Lumieres and took my hand.
"Pray, and tomorrow you will have a beautiful body like mine."
"You are very conceited," I said. "And besides, I don't believe in miracles."
These fanatics always seem to be hard of hearing.
He carried on with his discourse so I walked away.

I often wear a long greatcoat.
I walk with a cane.
I conceal my cane under
my greatcoat. I wear it
like a soldier wears his sword.
Why do women wear makeup?
Men wear wigs?
Politicians tell lies?

I'm at the Cafe Geurbois
watching the bourgeoisie
on their way to the Opera.
Here they are in all their finery,
all trying to outdo each other --
the country invades Culture.
These are the people who keep Verdi alive.
After the show some of them
will deign to stop here for a quick Pernod.
"That was the most lovely set
for La Boheme I've ever seen..."
"Why Madame Melba is so fat..."
"Of course Melba is fading.
We saw her as Aida last year and really..."
The speaker goes up ten points.
The listener goes down fifty,
because she failed to get tickets last year,
but not to worry,
she manages to think of something:
"Well," she says, "we couldn't have
come anyway.
Poor Eugenie was so ill.
She had this nasty boil
on her neck and all this green pus started
oozing out -- well, anyway..."

(LIGHTS CHANGE SLOWLY TO A NIGHTMARISH QUALITY.)

(PUTS HAT AWAY.)
I'm broke again.
I dreamed that Zola was out for a walk
and I sneaked up behind him
and stole 50 centimes out of his pocket.
When I got home
I hid the money under my pillow.
I went to sleep and dreamed that
the money had multiplied
into thousands of francs –
each coin the size of a millstone
and they were stacked up in piles
all over my room.
There was a knock at the door.
I tried to get across the room
but I couldn't dislodge the coins.
I used my stick as a crowbar,
I beat on the coins to try to dislodge them –
all to no avail.
I sat down on the bed and cried.
Suddenly a voice called, "Achille,
Achille, are you in there?"
It was Zola.
"I'm sick," I said. "I can't get to the door.
I'm sorry."
"Come out," he said, "Come out and face me
like a man."

(BLACKOUT. RAOUL ENTERS IN DARK AND STRIKES MATCH, LIGHTS PIPE AS LIGHTS FADE UP.)

In the dark back booths of smoke-filled bars,
what do they say to you, Raoul?
What do they say about me?
"Surely you don't spend time with him, do you?
You must feel sorry for him. It is sad
and of course he knows Cézanne, but really!"

(RAOUL TAKES CAFÉ CHAIR, CROSSES TO BESIDE ACHILLE DURING THIS NEXT STANZA AND SITS.)

Raoul doesn't like my new portrait of him.
He covered it with a cloth.
"I don't mean to be unkind," he said,
"but it just isn't me."

(THEY ARE AT THE MOULIN ROUGE. RAOUL IS ENJOYING IT, ACHILLE IS NOT.)

I finally summoned up the courage
to go to <u>The Moulin Rouge</u> –
Raoul talked me into it.
It struck me as rowdy and pretentious.
Full of pseudo-artistes being daring.
Then my worst fears were realized:
An old buffer with yellow satin gloves

came up, bowed and said, "Do I have
the honor to address The Honorable
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec?"
"From what I hear," I replied,
"it's far from an honor to address
that dishonorable, drunken dauber.
Take note, sir, that not all
bearded dwarfs are the same person.
I might also point out that I am
better looking and at least have the
distinction of finishing my paintings!"

(RAOUL BURSTS INTO LAUGHTER. HE GETS UP, GOES TO OTHER SIDE OF CHAIR, SITS ON FLOOR, HIS BACK AGAINST THE CHAIR.)

(DAYLIGHT)

Under the tamarind tree fanning itself
like a jaded peacock, Raoul tells me
a story he has told before:
It concerns an old man of Tuscany who said
he valued love more than his riches.
He gave away his riches to his boy lover
who invested them, doubled them
and left with the money in a boat
with a yellow sail. The sail was so
yellow, Raoul says, that it blazed like the sun;
like the sun, I repeat, snapping
off grass blades and arranging them
in a circle on my lap. And the old man
was left to wander distractedly and beg
in the streets. The old man's name was
Alonzo known ever after as The Great Lover
and the boy lover's name was Giorgio
known ever after as The Crafty One and
he married a mulatto dancer in Madrid
and was never heard of again,
and I look up at the tamarind tree
which drops a leaf courteously in my lap
in my circle of grass blades and I say,
"Come to the point, Raoul; tell me
you're leaving me."

(RAOUL GETS UP, GIVES ACHILLE A LOOK, AND EXITS.)

I only have fifty centimes left.
I admit defeat.
Madame F. is sending money.
I'm going home.

(LIGHTS CHANGE TO NIGHT, INTERIOR OF COACH. TAKES HAT AND CANE IN HAND.)

I'm sitting in the coach for Aix, Raoul.
It's raining. Now it's my turn to leave.
All those talks we had -- Hugo, David,
Titian, Couperin.
Never a word from you, not even a note.
If only you'd left an address...
The coach is passing the Café Loup --
I remember a night...

(ATTENDANT ENTERS, TAKES ACHILLE'S CANE, AND BEATS IT SEVERAL TIMES LOUDLY ON THE FLOOR.)

Some children are knocking on the side
of the coach, making faces at me, so I shout,
"Go away, you little brats!"

(ATTENDANT THROWS CANE TO GROUND, RUNS AWAY.)

And as though
I had cut a chord which held them to me,
they snap back out of sight,
back to the hubbub of Paris,
down the tunnel of the past.

(ALL LIGHTS UP. ATTENDANT ENTERS, HIS MANNER BRISK, EFFICIENT, IMPERSONAL. HE TAKES RICKETY CHAIR, PLACES IT WHERE VELVETEEN CHAIR WAS AT THE OPENING, PUTS RUNDOWN TABLE BESIDE CHAIR. HE CROSSES TO ACHILLE, WHO RELUCTANTLY SURRENDERS HIS HAT. ATTENDANT TAKES HAT AND PORTFOLIO, PUTS HAT ON PROP TABLE AND LEANS PORTFOLIO AGAINST OLD CHAIR. ATTENDANT CROSSES BACK TO ACHILLE, PAUSES, SCOOPS UP ACHILLE, AND CARRIES HIM TO OLD CHAIR. ATTENDANT SETS POSTCARDS, WINE BOTTLE, GLASS, AND PEAR, ON TABLE, AND EXITS. PARIS LIGHTS FADE OUT.)

(AIX-EN-PROVENCE)

I live in a family of ignoramuses.
None of my children is artistic in the least.
All they can draw is conclusions, and not very
intelligent ones at that!
All Gaston does is add -- he spends
his money on horses.
All Sophie does is sew -- she ignores
her husband.
All Alexander does is play chess --
he manages a store.
They're neither handsome nor ugly,

perfect nor deformed.
It amazes me how anyone as extraordinary
as myself could produce such ordinary offspring.
Well, I married an ordinary woman.

Today I'm going to the country
to see Carlos, my outrageous friend.
Carlos is obsessed with vegetables.
He grows them for aesthetic purposes.
I've never seen such specimens.
I wish I had a photographic camera.
I could never capture them.
God help us, they are obscene.
Carrots like cocks,
turnips like breasts
and lettuces
giving way, giving way.

(ACHILLE TAKES POSTCARDS FROM TABLE.)

Marie has gone to stay with her mother
and taken the children with her.
I'm back sitting on the Art School steps.
"Postcards! Postcards!"
Each one takes only ten minutes to draw.
"Postcards!" Women's arses sell best.
"Dirty postcards!" Each one drawn with care.
"Postcards! Only a sou!" Each one,
a work of art. "Postcards!
Three for the price of two!"

(REPLACES POSTCARDS ON TABLE.)

I wanted to go and see Carlos today.
Alphonse told me not to go.
I asked him why
and he kept shaking his head.
I said, "There's something you're not
telling me, Alphonse."
I followed him into the garden
and when he turned around
I noticed his hand was shaking.
"Just trust me," he said.
"Don't go."

Hunger scrapes at me --
a wooden spoon
gouging out a bowl.
I'm sick of bouillon
and dry bread.
I could grow vegetables like Carlos but
I don't know how.
Neither does Marie.
Thank God for café au lait --
It fills my stomach,
winds me up like a musical box:
what is my tune?
The rustle of a leaf
in summer wind,
or the whimpering of my children at night?
Alphonse asked me today
"How long is it
since you had a square meal?"
I had to count on my fingers.

I won't be going to Carlos's house.
I heard the rumour today.
Marie and the children live with Carlos now.
Alphonse, that coward, couldn't tell me.

(TAKES A DRINK.)

I'm glad Marie and the children are at Carlos's.
He was lonely.
They'll eat well.
He's a good cook
and what a gardener!

(THE LIGHTS CHANGE TO CAFÉ. LATE NIGHT.)

(HE DRINKS.)

Here they come, straggling into the café
at one a.m.
What a motley crew -- the bums,
the rejects of Aix -- all artists
in the mind or in the bone.
"Welcome," says old Maillot, the owner,
"Welcome, whoever you are."

Fernando the waiter just danced for me.
He dances Flamenco.
I clapped. <u>Arriba!</u> <u>Arriba!</u>
What fun we had, but then old Maillot
came over and stopped him.
I sat there clapping for several seconds
alone at my table. The momentum carried me on in a trance
out of time

and in time, out of life
and in it.

(LIGHTS TO DAYLIGHT.)

(HE TAKES OFF HIS JACKET.)

I've been reduced
to living in a shack in Alphonse's garden.
Well, I might be in the gutter,
or worse still a room at Madame F.'s.
Alphonse's wife feeds me a couple of times
a week and I'm allowed to pick
the flowers. I try to make a home of it.
I brought some shells from the lake --
white fans with pink linings;
I put them on the window sill --
like white sailboats
they rock in the breeze.

The Chautier kids scream a lot.
They peek round the door
and stare at me.
If I look up,
they run off giggling.
I found an old vampire mask.
Next time they do it,
I'll put it on
and make sucking noises through my teeth.
That'll cure them.

I'm afraid of children.
They are afraid of me.
They think me a child grown old,
a bearded eight-year-old.
No one wants to feel they might
get old unnaturally,
get to be a man before
they have the size or years.
Sometimes the local gang
of five-year-olds rushes me
in the alley.
They pretend they're going to
knock me down, so they run at me
like a tribe of warring Hottentots
and stop at the last minute,
panting and sweating,
their faces a foot from mine.
Once they did knock me down
and they stood over me and screamed:
"Hunchback! Hunchback!"

(MOMENT)
(HE TAKES POSTCARDS AND THROWS THEM ACROSS THE STAGE IN FRUSTRATION. PUTS HAND TO HEAD, THEN FOLDS HANDS IN PRAYER FOR A MOMENT.)
In the church
these high vaults and pillars would
dwarf a giant.
So I, a dwarf,
or shall we say one of diminutive stature,
since I am not strictly speaking a dwarf,
I, a very small person,
am on a par with anyone.
Knowing this,
I feel taller than usual
and more confident.
But there is always something that reminds me.
I look at the pulpit.
I could never have been a priest --
my head would only just poke up over
the rim -- ridiculous; to the congregation
I'd look like Tom Thumb in his top hat.
Also at the altar saying Mass --
to God my head would appear
like an absurd blaspheming moon
on the sacred horizon.
No wonder I gave up the Church.
I always wanted to be best at everything--
it was priest or nothing.
Now it's nothing.
I am a small bohemian with grandiose ideas --
big as my head, the realization slight
as my body.
Top heavy I've been called.
Like Humpty Dumpty
as the English say
I had a big fall:
Paris to Aix, would-be fame to everlasting obscurity.
Do we make our own messes?
I should have spoken up more.
But failure always finds a way.
If it weren't for my size or my deformity
it would be because I was an orphan,
had a drunkard for a mother
or because I was just too nice.
Failure finds a way.
It leads you by the hand and says:
"Come this way -- it's easier.
I am the comforter of the might-have-beens."

I finally admit it.
I haven't grown at all.
I can make myself fit any of the notches
in the door frame.
If I really relax,
I'm lower than the lowest one.
(POURS A DRINK)

Old age bends me like a twig
in December wind,
curved like a charcoal line
on my canvas.
(DRINKS.)

If you look closely at the line of charcoal,
you'll see it's composed of tiny dots.
There's no firmness.
I'm infirm --
the wind can blow me from the canvas
any time.
(FINISHES DRINK.)

Dear Raoul --
this should be a letter to you but it isn't.
The days of absinthe, hot geraniums
and the placid Seine minding our business
went away with you in the carriage
to the other side of town.
I hear the clatter still.
All I did, all I did
was to touch your thigh --
my hand wandered too close.
You pushed me away.
You pushed me away.
You pushed me away.
You said, "I can't be your lover."
"Raoul," I said, "I never asked you to be."

(DRINKS, CONTEMPLATING EMPTY GLASS.)

Drink is a drug no scientist
has properly investigated.
Its subtleties go unrecorded;
(POURS)
with me
two pernods and a vodka
produce malaise,
five whiskeys acrimony,
two litres of wine
lechery and nostalgia...
(TOASTS, DRINKS. HE IS GETTING DRUNK.)
I read somewhere that
drink is an escape
from panic and loss;
I admit to escaping.
I'm one of those merry artists
numbing their panic,
who staggers home to ugly shack
or dim attic, to lover,
to wife and children
who say in their sleep:
"I wish he were a lawyer,
a carpenter, anything – "
(HE NODS OFF)

(LIGHTS DOWN TO LATE NIGHT.)

(HE WAKES WITH A START.)

(HE IS GROGGY.)

It's a minute past three
in the morning. The candle's
burning low like a ballerina
sinking to the floor in a
death dance; the only sounds --
the clock ticking, a distant dog
barking. It's so peaceful
now that Marie and the children
have gone.
I can do exactly as I please;
I can drink.
(HE DRINKS)
I can swear.
I can be untidy.
I can stay up till all hours.
I can even scream if I want to.
And best of all, I can paint
as much as I damn well please

without interruption.
If only Paul would answer my letters...

(SING-SONG)
"There's no fool like an old fool."
(TAKES DRINK AND NEARLY DROPS THE GLASS RETURNING IT TO THE TABLE.)
I'm still alert, Raoul,
I'm not gone yet.
Only today I passed a peony,
broken off and lying in the gutter.
I came home and drew it perfectly from memory.
In my drawing, it lies on the steps of
the Art School –
red petals, scattered, bruised and torn.

(HE JUST BARELY MANAGES TO TAKE ANOTHER DRINK.)

Moonlight is shining in the graveyard of
my canvasses.
On some my name is worn away,
on others a face is half gone.
(HE SLIDES HIMSELF OFF THE CHAIR, ONTO THE FOOTSTOOL.)
I wander past these tombstones,
dusting off some, dabbing others
with imaginary splashes of red paint –
red peonies, arrows dipped in blood,
my true lovers, my real children –
I apologize to you:
I could never afford the best paints,
the right linen...
(PICKS UP SKETCHBOOK.)
Here's a drawing –
who is it? Ah yes, Raoul, so smug,
the survivor. Whatever happened to
my sketches of Paul? Here's a backview
of Marie shunning me as always
like the moon itself -- I always preferred
the sun, Paul's great smile on a hot
July day, his hand on my back and he'd say:
"Come my remarkable fellow,
my inspiration,
let's paint!"

Who's that at the door?
It's Paul.
He's so distinguished looking
with his grey beard.
He fills the doorframe.
(HE SLIDES HIMSELF ONTO THE FLOOR.)

Hey, Paul, cher ami!
"Don't move," he says, "I have something for you."
He pulls a wooden box out from
under a silk scarf.
"Lo," he says, "Magic!"
It's a box of paints.
I'm struck dumb.
Paul says, "You'd better use them or I'll
take them home
and use them myself."
"I will," I say.
Somehow I can't look him in the eyes
when I say it and I feel ashamed.
It's not because I won't use them.
I will.
But I keep thinking, why can't I
look him in the eyes?
I will use them.

(HE CLIMBS BACK UP ONTO THE FOOTSTOOL.)

"Dear Achille, since I'm the only person
I know now and have any regard for,
Dear Achille what do you make of all this?
You eat once or twice a week.
You pick up food from the garbage
and off other people's plates
at the cafe.
Maillot's son threw you out yesterday
for trying to steal a bottle of rum.
Your heart beats irregularly --
ta-ta-tarrumph-ta,
ta-ta-tarrumph-ta-ta.
It's always raining.
It's cold.
I give you a month.
You have rheumatic hands,
gnarled like old tree roots;
the tree is almost dead,

but the roots cling on.
You're in search of another body --
this one's done.
You did make a gesture --
there are your drawings and paintings
for what they're worth.
Then there's Paul's portrait of you.
Someone may look at it and say:
'He was quite a character.
I'll imagine myself to be him,
and make his story mine.'
And if this person is large or small,
whole or crippled,
if he is your double
or your opposite
man or woman,
if he or she
can imagine you
in his house in Canton,
the Ukraine,
or on the moon,
they will celebrate your gesture,
your persistence,
which is all you had."

I don't feel as if I'd been
here before, so maybe after I die
I'll pass myself on
like a piece of furniture
left unsold at an auction
and given away.
But what about
passing on one's body only?
I'll call it re-incorporation.
What if I could donate my
poor misshapen frame to plague
another after me? What a curse!
Yet a blessing, a hindrance,
a fact of creation
and therefore a joy...
I never feel as if
I belong to myself.
My mind is too big
for my body, my essence too big
for my small frame,
as if I had been stuffed
into myself like a sausage
fit to burst,
an overfull suitcase
snapped shut,
ready for the journey.
Will I arrive intact,

with all my contents

in one piece?

(HE IS HOLDING UP HIS HAND, GAZING AT IT. DURING THIS, HE SLOWLY TURNS HIS PALM TOWARD THE AUDIENCE, AS ALL STAGELIGHTS COME UP TO FULL.)

Once there was a color
that was called Achille.
No one knew how to mix it
except Achille,
and he mixed it
with the utmost care.

(BLACKOUT)

THE END

GLC 67
Hew.H

The Blaspheming Moon, 1990

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